

## *Preserving Species*

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*For many plants and animals found here, living at this national seashore and wildlife refuge means more than life as usual – it means life over extinction.*

Mention Canaveral and Merritt Island and many people imagine space exploration – the excitement of countdown and the thrill of liftoff. But there is another kind of space here, one that is almost a secret from outsiders. This space can be secluded, where gentle breezes caress miles of primitive beach where endangered sea turtles struggle from their leathery eggs. Or the space can be boisterous, as humid air reaches the aroma of tropical blossoms and insects noisily voice their approval.

This space in Florida, so different and so unexpected, has been preserved through the teamwork of three federal agencies. It was set aside in the late 1950's as a buffer zone for nearby National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) activities. When the space race launched the John F. Kennedy Space Center into world prominence, preservation of this barrier island was ensured. In cooperation with NASA, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service has managed Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge since 1963, and the National Park Service has operated Canaveral National Seashore since 1975. These agencies are caretakers of this special area, where species as diverse as bald eagles and alligators and bromeliads and mangroves are nourished by the warm waters and temperate climate.



Winds blow and Atlantic waters splash against the beach, together massaging grains of sand into dunes that parallel the shore as far as you can see. Hidden in this graceful image is the buttress of a barrier island – a low-lying ribbon of land braced with a spine of sand dunes. Behind this protective island, salty Atlantic water flowing through inlets combines with seasonal rains to form the Indian River and Mosquito Lagoon estuaries. Fish, oysters, clams and shrimp begin life in these fertile nurseries, which, in turn, attract an abundance of waterfowl. Until the late 1950's the marshes also nurtured saltmarsh mosquitoes, which at times could produce a million mosquitoes per square yard in one day. Because saltmarsh mosquitoes do not lay eggs in fresh water, engineers divided 69,000 acres of marsh into walled impoundments to control water levels. Salinity, and saltmarsh

mosquitoes. The new environment attracted new residents, and today it is common to see waterfowl, alligators, otters, and wading birds, such as snowy egrets, white ibises, and great blue herons.

The barrier island and its waterways offer sanctuary for an abundant blend of plants and animals. Recorded here are 1,045 species of plants and 310 species of birds. Hammocks of ancient oaks draped with Spanish moss grow near sand dunes covered with palmetto and sea oats. Thousands of migratory birds stop over during their journeys north and south. This haven supports 14 wildlife species federally listed as endangered or threatened, including sea turtles, West Indian manatees, southern bald eagles, wood storks, peregrine falcons, eastern indigo snakes, and Florida scrub jays. Together, Canaveral and Merritt Island form a sheltered space, where the countdown is not of spaceships but of endangered animals ensuring life for future generations.



Castle Windy Trail